



## The Laments of the Virgin in Eastern Orthodox Good Friday Service

By Virginia M. Kimball

Can anyone imagine the grief of a mother watching her son die a torturous death, executed as a criminal, while knowing he was the Son of God? The liturgical hymns of ancient centuries probe this scene in compelling, chanted dialogue between mother and son on Holy Friday.

The tone is mournful while attention is drawn to a representation of Christ's tomb: the **kouvloukion** covered in flowers and holding the **epitaphios** – an image of the dead Christ. Incense permeates the senses. The mood is solemn as the hymns chanted by the cantors (or **psaltis**) contemplate the Creator who “became earthly to renew the earthly.” At this moment in the Eastern Orthodox Holy Friday ritual, the chanting is true lamentation. We hear the mother and her son:

Son: *Lament not for me, Mother, as you behold me in the grave. I am you son whom you conceived in your womb without seed. I shall rise and I shall be glorified.*

Mother: *My eternal son, I escaped suffering at your remarkable birth and was so marvelously blessed. And now, beholding you, my God, a breathless corpse, I am torn apart with the spear of bitter sorrow. But arise that I may be magnified by you!*

Son: *The earth, O my Mother, covers me by mine own will but the gate-keepers of Hades trembled seeing me clothed in a blood-spattered robe of vengeance; for as God I have struck down the enemies with the cross, and I will rise again, and magnify you.<sup>1</sup>*

Moments afterward, the congregation all holds up their candles in a dimly lit church and chant phrase after phrase of lamentation. Suddenly, the Virgin Mother's voice is heard again: “My son, how can I bury you? ... Who shall give me water and a fountain of tears, that I may weep for my sweet Jesus?”<sup>2</sup> And in a few moments again, we hear her lamentation: “O Life, do not be long among the dead.”<sup>3</sup> And again, interspersed in the lamenting: “O my sweet springtime, my sweetest Child, to where has your beauty vanished? ... O Light of my eyes, my sweetest child, how are you now covered in the grave? ... Arise, O Giver of Life!”<sup>4</sup>

It was Ephrem the Syrian (4<sup>th</sup> C) who first wrote these poetic lines for Holy Week liturgy portraying this dialogue. The great hymn writer Romanos of the 5<sup>th</sup> century (some

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from: *Greek Orthodox Holy Week and Easter Services, A New English Translation*, compiled and translated by Father George L. Papadeas (South Daytona, Florida: Patmos Press, 2007), 386-387.

<sup>2</sup> Papadeas, 388.

<sup>3</sup> Papadeas, 390.

<sup>4</sup> Papadeas, 393.

scholars say the 8<sup>th</sup> century) described the Virgin's laments now found in the hymns of Compline following the "Great Hours" on Holy Friday, not always included in the Greek service but in other Orthodox traditions such as the Russian Orthodox Church.

*"Where, O my Son and God, are the good tidings of the Annnciation that Gabriel brought to me? ...Now, O my sweet Light, I behold Thee naked, wounded, lifeless. Release me from my agony and take me with Thee, O my Son and God. ... Leave me not to live alone, for I cannot bear to look upon Thee, my sweet Light."*<sup>5</sup>

These chanted lines are the mother weeping for her dead son – questioning and yet believing that he will rise from the dead. Centuries old, with their poetic birth in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, these laments paint the paradox of Holy Friday, often touching some Christians to the depths of their heart.

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Mosaic icon by Robert Andrews  
Transfiguration of the Savior Greek Orthodox Church, Lowell, Massachusetts  
*Photo by Jean Butler, Westford, Massachusetts*

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<sup>5</sup> Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware, translated from the original Greek *The Lenten Triodion*, translated from the original Greek (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 1994), 620.